

VZCZCXR05398
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0807/01 2210425

ZNY SSSSS ZZH
R 090425Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 4715
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 7033
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1946
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 3378
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 7844

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000807

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/07/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIA'S APPROACH TO LEBANON: CORE INTERESTS AT PLAY, BUT NO GRAND STRATEGY FOR ACTION

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¶1. (S) SUMMARY: The Syrian government watched Lebanon's August 5 Metn by-elections unfold in studied silence intended to signal the SARG's detachment from events across the border. The SARG's silence reflected both the regime's perception that its allies in Lebanon are gaining ground and the limits of its ability to pursue a unilateral agenda, according to a range of Embassy contacts. Lebanon remains a core interest for the SARG but, as is characteristic of Bashar al-Assad's presidency, the regime lacks a strategic vision for Lebanon. Syrian contacts see the SARG motivated by a general desire to ensure that Lebanon does not act against regime interests or become an outpost for anti-Syrian activity. To that end, Damascus is perceived as fixated on undermining Sa'ad Hariri and the March 14 coalition. Contacts also cite SARG efforts to reassert its influence in Lebanon, though most believe the regime's ambitions fall short of sowing widespread violence. However, the limits of Syria's reach since its withdrawal mean that Damascus is increasingly dependent on its allies in Lebanon, particularly Hizballah, and Embassy contacts surmise that the SARG will heed Hizballah's preferences. Damascus and its Lebanese allies are no doubt tallying the political scorecard after the opposition victory in Metn, and re-assessing any recently rumored thoughts of compromise. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S) NO GRAND STRATEGY FOR LEBANON: A range of Embassy contacts canvassed recently on Syria-Lebanon relations assessed that Lebanon remains a core strategic interest for the Syrian government and one of the regime's top concerns. Yet, given the importance of Lebanon to regime thinking, few believe the SARG has a comprehensive vision for what it seeks in Lebanon. SARG thinking is shaped by a general desire to ensure that Lebanon's government does not act against Syrian interests and to prevent Lebanon from being used by the US or others as an avenue for harassing or destabilizing Syria. Commenting to the Charge on Syria's lack of long-term vision, Egypt's ambassador argued that the SARG is focused only on what it seeks to prevent in Lebanon -- namely, progress on the Rafiq Hariri assassination tribunal and a government dominated by his son, Sa'ad -- rather than what it hopes to achieve. The regime's fixation on Sa'ad Hariri and his allies was echoed in varying degrees by a number of contacts, from the armchair-thumping exclamation of informal government advisor, Riad al-Abrash, that Syria would NEVER accept Sa'ad Hariri, to the assertion of Sunni businessman and publisher of a number of fledgling, quasi-independent magazines, Abdel-Salam Haykal, that it was Sa'ad Hariri who picked a fight with the SARG, not vice versa. Other contacts, while acknowledging Syria's opposition to the current Lebanese government, framed SARG motivations in terms of its concerns over Israel and the need to prevent Lebanon from concluding

any deal with Israel that excluded Syria.

13. (S) The Syrian lack of vision combines with diminished reach into Lebanon to produce a Syrian approach that is alternately pro-active and reactive, note Embassy contacts. The Charge's exchanges over time with fellow diplomats and a number of Syrians willing to broach the sensitive issue of SARG interference in Lebanon create a picture of Bashar and his intimates pro-actively persuading, pressuring, and intimidating as necessary in their attempts to shape the Lebanese political landscape. The SARG works through an array of actors, from sympathetic Lebanese who, through long-standing relationships or marriages of convenience, see benefit in SARG backing to direct proxies -- such as the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party and armed Palestinian groups -- that depend on Damascus for support and protection. (NOTE: Few contacts appear comfortable openly discussing regime instigation of violence. A number of Syrians even questioned whether their security services would be capable of executing so many attacks without leaving fingerprints or why Syria would choose to implicate itself with such blatant timing and targeting. END NOTE.)

14. (S) At the same time, the SARG is portrayed as increasingly buffeted by developments in Lebanon. It is less able to dictate policy than before its 2005 withdrawal and more often compelled to shift tactics in response to events or the calculations of its key allies. Hints of SARG softening on the issue of an interim deal in Lebanon prior to Lebanon's August 5 by-elections may offer one example of an alteration in what was previously a firm Syrian stance. Al-Hayat correspondent, Ibrahim Hamidi, and Samir al-Taqi, a think tank director and confidante of the Syrian Foreign Minister, separately asserted that Damascus showed flexibility on the issue of the presidency and government

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composition to recent European and Arab visitors, though each saw the SARG holding firm elsewhere: Hamidi said Damascus drew the line on the Syria/Lebanon border debate and armed groups in Lebanon; al-Taqi portrayed the regime as ready to settle on a presidential candidate acceptable to Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United States in exchange for ensuring Lebanon would not make a separate move toward Israel.

15. (S) BOLSTERING KEY ALLIES: Pro-active SARG efforts to re-assert influence in Lebanon are described by embassy contacts as driven by both the desire to undermine the current government and to erase the humiliation of its hurried withdrawal from Lebanon. Ongoing SARG interaction with pro-Syrian Lebanese is clear, though visits to Damascus generally receive little public comment. Embassy monitoring of media coverage of foreign visitors to Damascus noted a dramatic decline in the public profile of Lebanese visits after the Syrian withdrawal in 2005. Recent visits covered by the media include former prime minister Salim al-Hoss, Tripoli-based Islamic Group leader Fathi Yaqan, former information minister Elie Ferzli, and former defense minister Abdul Rahim Murad. Another former information minister, Michel Samaha, and former minister of parliament Nasser Qandil were scheduled to visit Damascus during the annual Asad Library book fair in early August. Others enter Syria quietly, often for personal reasons, presumably with official meetings on the side (NOTE: Minister of parliament and former deputy speaker, Michel Murr, and Druze politician and former environment minister, Wi'am Wahhab, were spotted in Syria recently at the wedding of Murad's son. END NOTE.)

16. (S) The SARG is assumed to be deeply engaged in supporting its Lebanese allies attempts to gain political ground. Prior to the August 5 Metn by-election, Internet publication Elaph reported on a late July meeting in Germany to discuss election strategy between Syrian deputy vice president, Muhammad Nassif Khayrbik, and Lebanese presidential hopeful and FPM leader, Michel Aoun. The narrow victory of Aoun's candidate in the Metn election reinforces regime perceptions

that the political momentum in Lebanon favors its friends without, as Abrash confidently observed in late July, any need for open SARG interference.

¶7. (S) THE LIMITS OF SARG INFLUENCE: Even as the SARG is viewed as manipulating Lebanese politics where possible, its increasing reliance upon key allies, particularly Hizballah, is cited as a measure of the limits of the regime's ability to pursue a unilateral agenda. Hizballah is by far Syria's most powerful partner in Lebanon, note most Embassy contacts, and the SARG is invested in safeguarding the Shiite group's domestic political power and militia status. As a result, Damascus is increasingly compelled to consider Hizballah preferences when shaping its own agenda. Ultimately, Hizballah "dictates in Lebanon," observed Hamidi, and "Syria and Iran will follow." Sunni publisher Haykal noted, however, that the SARG is aware of the perils of over-reliance on Hizballah and remains frustrated at the relative weakness of other opposition players, including Shiite parliament speaker Nabih Berri. Syria will accommodate Hizballah, he added, but Damascus no doubt knows that promoting Hizballah dominance is a recipe for sectarian "chaos" in Lebanon. Few contacts believed Syria saw benefit in pushing Lebanon as far as widespread sectarian violence, though the Egyptian ambassador opined that Syria saw value in "controlled chaos" in Lebanon.

¶8. (S) COMMENT: Damascus and its Lebanese allies are no doubt tallying the political scorecard after the opposition victory in Metn, and re-assessing any recently rumored thoughts of compromise. Reports of SARG flexibility before the by-elections probably reflected SARG calculations that a compromise president, approved by Hizballah, would not challenge key SARG interests while enabling its allies to avoid charges of obstructionism. In the aftermath of the election, however, Damascus is likely to eschew compromise and urge its allies to continue playing hardball, banking that the balance of power increasingly favors the opposition.

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